# THE ANGLO-TURKISH DISPUTE OF 1872-75 OVER THE ADEN HINTERLAND, AND ITS RELEVANCE.

R.N. MEHRA, LUCKNOW

The recent boundary dispute between the Yemen Arab Republic (North Yemen) and the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (South Yemen) has its genesis in the controversy that arose between their former imperial masters, the Ottoman Empire and Great Britain during 1872-75 in the wake of the opening of the Suez Canal.[1]

In August 1872 a large contingent of the Turkish forces marched from Yemen into the Dthali country of the Aden hinterland and forced the leading chiefs of the place into submission.[2] In quick succession the adventurous soldiers ravaged through the territories of the adjoining Alawi, Aulaqui and Abdali Sultanates, supplanted a number of ruling chiefs and substituted them by those who readily accepted Turkish overlordship. In the Abdali Sultanates, at the doorstep of Aden, the advancing Turks occupied Zaid and Shake, the two most fertile as well as strategically located districts near the capital, Lahej. In the Alawi country, the Turks captured the main chief, Said-bib-Saif. In the same manner, Ali-bin-Mokbil the most influential and powerful Chief of the Dthali Sultanate was replaced by a thoroughly acquiescent Chief. The Turks posted a superintendant at Dthali with a large contingent and returned to Taizz (Yemen).[3]

These incidents attracted the attention of the government of Lord Northbrook in India who took up the matter with the Home Government. Northbrook proposed, in February 1873, that in order to effectively meet the Turkish menace the British government may (a) rapidly conclude 'protective' treaties with the chiefs of the numerous Sultanates and Sheikhdoms of the Aden hinterland and (b) then declare the entire area a British 'Protectorate'. But it was turned down by Prime Minister Gladstone, who strongly felt that a British protectorate over the Aden hinterland would not only impose indefinite and irksome obligations on the British government but would also impair the understanding which then existed between England and Turkey.[4]

In the meantime, the Yemeni forces advanced further in the Abdali and Haushabi territories.[5] This forced the Briti Government to authorise the Government of India to ask the Resident at Aden to afford protection to the two Sultanates. The Resident sent a small contingent to Al Hauta, the capita of the Abdali Sultanate. The troops were about to collide w the Turks ordered their garrison to withdraw.[6]

The subsequent demand of the Governor General of Yemen that the British also pull out their forces from Al Hauta ga a new turn to the episode. Argyll, the then Secretary of St for India, vehemently protested against the Turkish demand. He wrote:

> "The relation of the British Government with the tribe around Aden are independent of Turkey, whom we do not to have any locus standi in that region." 7

The Ottoman Government countered this by formally anno its historical claim over the entire Aden hinterland. It de in January 1874 that 'as Caliph, the Ottoman Sultan alone wa entitled to sovereignty over the ancient domain of the Calip including the Aden Sultanates.[8]

The British Foreign Office reacted sharply to this and April 1874 declared:

> "Whatever rights of sovereignty the Porte might have had in Yemen in the past it is notorious that since the year 1663 Yemen has been under the rule of the Arab Chiefs independent of the Porte."[9]

As to the 'ancient domain of the Caliphate' the reply sent

> "The possessions of the Caliphate passed out of the occupation of the Porte more than two hundred years ago and fell into the independent tribes over whom the Porte did not attempt to exercise control until the present century when the troops of Mehmet Ali extended their conquests as far as Mocha." [10]

Which of these assertions is correct? Before passing a judge let us review the facts which the western and indigenous researchers have provided us and on which they generally ag

The earliest accounts speak of most of these Sultanat as "semi independent tribal Sultanates of Al Yaman." [11]

Generally, while the western Sultanates comprising Amiri Abdali, Upper Yafa etc. remained under a loose control of the Sabeean and Minean rulers of Yemen,[12] the bulk of the eastern Sultanates preserved their independence during most of the ancient period.[13] They remained upto the close of the first century B.C. under the successive indigenous kingdoms of Mam, Oataban and Saba whose prosperity was founded on the trade in frankincense. The Amiri, Abdali, Upper Yafa and Upper Aulaqui occasionally lost their independence to the conquerors of the Yemen. Aden flourished during this period as an entrepot between the Indian and the Red Sea ports.[14]

In the early Christian centuries, Aden and the western Sultanates fell first under the Ethiopians and later under the Persians. With the advent of Islam, in the seventh century, the various Sultanates and Sheikhdoms fell to the advancing Mohammadan conquerors.[15]

During the eighth and the ninth centuries these Sultanates and Sheikhdoms became divided into the Shiates and Sunnites following the great split in Islam. While the eastern Sultanates embraced the Shafai (Sunni) faith the bulk of the Western Sultanates, who were still under the (Zaidi) Yemeni control, accepted the Zaidi (Shia) faith. Al-Hakami, noted Arab historian, speaks of the area of the Western Sultanates as 'forming a part of the Aden Kingdom of Tihamah, one of the two main ports at Al Yamen[16] and describes the Hadramaut (Eastern) Sultanates as independent tribal States.[17]

The Zaidi (Imamic) sway over the Western Sultanates as well as over Yemen began shrinking towards the close of the tenth century. The area passed under the control of first the Najahides, about the year 1021, then the Sulayids in 1037 and finally of the Hamadawids in 1098.[18] The eastern Sultanates during this period fell under the Qarmalian influence but without losing their independence.[19]

During the thirteenth century the Western Sultanates and Yemen came under the Rasulides.[20] The Rasulides extended their sway eastwards and brought the eastern sultanates of the Hadramaut under their control.

The Rasulides maintained their rule over Yemen and Hadramaut until about the middle of the fifteenth century. After a desultory war which lasted from 1446 to 1454 the Rasulides gave way to the Tahirid conquerors from the north. In the process, Hadramaut was subjugated by the most powerful Sultanate, the Mahri.[21] This sway was maintained until about 1517. The Sultanates beyond Aden, that is, Subeihi, Aqrabi Fadthli etc. were also brought under the Tahiridian rule. The Tahirides were, during this period, under the Egyptian domination and paid tribute to the mamelukes rules there.[22]

In 1517 the Sultanates passed into the hands of the Ottomans when the latter subjugated the Tahirides and the Mamelukes.[23] The Ottomans consolidated their conquests of the area around 1538. They took Aden in 1547.[24] The adjoining island of Socotra fell to the Portuguese in 1507.

In 1629 the Zaidi Imam of Yemen overthrew the Turkish rule. Soon after the Imam reconquered the Western Sultanates, particularly the Dthali, Aulaqui, Haushabi etc. Thenceforth, for nearly a century the Sultanates remained under the Imamic (Yemeni) rule.

The Imamic hold began to shrink during the fourth decade of the eighteenth century. This encouraged the Western Sultanates to reassert their independent status. By the dawn of the nineteenth century the Western Sultanates were again as independent as their counterparts in the Hadramaut (East).

The British came into direct contact with Aden in 1799 in the make of the Egyptian campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte. The first political and commercial treaty with a ruler of Aden (Ahmad bin Abdul Wasim) was concluded in 1802.[25]

In January 1839 the British forcibly occupied Aden on the pretext of the plunder of Deria Daulat, a British protected vessel, by the then ruler of Aden, Abdul bin Kasim, and his men.[26] Thenceforth, until 1968 the British not only remained at Aden but also gradually and steadily lengthened the penumbra of their control over the entire length and breadth of the Aden hinterland.[27]

The occupation of Aden by Britain provoked her adversaries European as well as Asiatic, particularly the ambitious Pasha of Egypt, Mohammad Ali.[28] The Pasha sent a secret mission to the Imam of Yemen and asked him to 'drive the British into the sea'.[29]

On the other hand, the local potentates led by the Chief of Abdali, Abdul Qasim, never rested for moment in their crusade against the aggressors until February 1843 when with far superior forces the British finally crushed them.[30] Among the European powers the only appreciable challenge came from the French shortly after the close of the Crimean War.[31] A French frigate named Narcisse proceeded from Zanzibar in December 1856 'with specific orders to occupy Perim'.[32] The French ship reached Aden on 11 January 1857. But before this the British Resident had already hoisted the Union Jack and also stalled a garrison at Perim. No collision occured. Nor did France take up the matter with Britain.

In April 1869 Britain purchased the peninsula of little Aden from its owner the Aqrabi Sultan.[33] Simultaneously, France and Italy gained foothold on the opposite shore of the Gulf of Aden. France acquired Sheikh Said. Italy established herself at Assab. But neither power challenged British supermacy in the Gulf of Aden.

While Britain, France, Italy and Egypt thus vied with one another in gaining footholds in the Gulf of Aden the Turks sent forces into Yemen and subjugated the breakaway province. By 1872 the process was completed and Yemen once again became a Turkish province in fact. It was after this and in the wake of their victorious advance that the Turks marched into the adjoining Aden hinterland and then laid claim over the entire area.

To sum up, these Sultanates and Sheikhdoms were semi-independent tribal states some under Yemen and others under the Sabean, Minean, Main, Qataban and Saba Kingdoms in succession during the ancient period, then under the Ethiopian and Persians during the early Christian centuries, under the Zaidi conquerors of Yemen from the advent of Islam to the close of the tenth century and thenceforth under the Najahids, Sulayids, Hamadawids, Mahdids, Rasulids in succession until about 1517 when the Ottoman Turks took over following their subjugation of the Mamelukes of Egypt and the Ramlids. The Turkish hold continued the next hundred years but around 1629 the Zaidis of Yemen re-established their control after expelling the Turks from their own land. Thenceforth, the various Sultanates and Sheikhdoms remained under a loose Yemeni control until about the close of the seventeenth century. As the Yemani authority weakened in the after years these Sultanates and Sheikhdoms again became independent of external control around 1730.

They came into contact with some of the western powers durin this period notably France, England and Portugal and conclud treaties as independent states. Since then these Sultanates Sheikhdoms withstood further onslaughts of their neighbours maintained an independent status, until Aden fell to the Tri in 1839. Even after this, the bulk of Sultanates and Sheikh continued to remain sovereign states, owning allegiance to n but themselves, when the Turks aggressed into their territor and laid claim over the entire area.

The Turkish advance was an act of aggression on an ind people. It was by no means an action aimed at subjugating a rebellious province. The long gap since their withdrawal in cut away whatever right of pre-eminence the Turks enjoyed in south Yemen in the same manner as the Sabean, Minean, Mam ai Qataban during the ancient period, Ethiopians, Persians, Wa Sulayhids and Rasulids during the early Christian centuries and Egyptians and Yemenis during the modern period lost thei titles to their more powerful successors. As for the Britis hegemony from 1839 to 1968 the Sultanates and Sheikhdoms rem independent sovereign states, excepting of course the Aden C which remained under exclusive British rule. South Yemen, t today as People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, is thus not obliged by precedence to admit the sovereign rights of any f former and erstwhile masters.

FOOT NOTE REFERENCES

1. The successive governments of North Yemen have since 1918 refuted the Aden Protectorate - Yemen frontier drawn up by the joint Anglo-Turkish Boundary Commission during 1902-05. The chief argument put forth is that the frontier was demarcated by two alien governments in total disregard of the wishes of the North Yemeni people. Likewise, Turkish governments from 1905 onwards have also repeatedly insisted that the frontier had been demarcated under threat, coercion and force, disregarding the historical claim of the Turks over the Aden hinterland. The British government on the other hand stoutly defend their position and assert that neither Britain nor the bulk of the Aden Sultanates ever recognised any Turkish claim over the region.

2. National Archives of India, Foreign Political-A, August 1874, Pp.134-36, No.135.

3. National Archives of India Political-A, August 1874, Pp.134-136, M-135, Also Pagot J.Aden(1969) P.25.

4. In October 1873 Gladstone wrote:

"There is every imaginable objection to the proposed protectorate. It binds us to support those over whose conduct to others we have no control. It threatens to impair and most chronically, our good understanding with Turkey which is necessary to the peace of the East. Nothing but absolute necessity can warrant minimum interference and that only within the limits moral and local to which that necessity extends. What we are fairly entitled to ask, is, that Turkey shall commit no act of aggression against the chieftains, and this we have every reason to believe we can obtain from our general experience at Constantinople. It would be unpardonable to make another Gold Coast of it." (National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secret E, April 1888, 182-185, No.183).

5. National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secret E, February 1874, 1-51, No.16.

6. National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secret E, February 1874, 1-51, No.21.

7. National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secret E, December 1873, 56-188, No.124.

8. National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secret E, May 1888, 196-219, No.206.

9. National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secret E, May 1874, 11-38.

10. National Archives of India, Foreign Department, Secret E, May 1874, 11-38.

11. O' Leary - Arabia before Mohammad (1927) P.8.

12. Hitti, P.K. - History of the Arabs (1970) P.52.

13. ibid p.55.

14. Hunter - Statistical Account of the British Settlement of Aden (1877) P.169.

15. Hitti op. cit. P.142.

16. Al Hakami - Yamen (1892) P.165.

17. Ibid P.180.

18. Princeton Oriental Studies Vol.VII 'Atlas of Islamic H (Hazard & Hitti)(1951) P.14.

19. Ibid

20. Ibid P.16.

21. Hitti - op.cit P.(22)

22. Ibid P.24.

23. Bury - Arabia Infelix (The Turk in Yemen)(1915) P.12.

24. Hitti - op.cit P.24.

25. Aitchison. C.4 - Treaties and Sanads, Vol.XIII(1933), No.II, P.53.

26. For details see Mehra R.N. - The Deria Daulat incident the British Occupation of Aden. (Indian History Congre

27. Mehra R.N. - The Emergence of the Aden Protectorate (1 Pp.10-37.

28. Better known as Mehmat Ali.

29. Macro. Eric; - Yemen and the Western World (1968), P.30

30. Mehra R.N. - Ibid P.46.

31. Of 1854-56.

32. Macro. Eric; Op. cit. P.34.

33. National Archives of India, Political-A, June 1869, 20 No.229.